

habits, as well as his political and diplomatic skills, set him apart from others. In the final analysis, he was the proper choice to serve as commander of the Continental Army.

## VII. GREAT BRITAIN COULD NEVER HAVE WON THE WAR

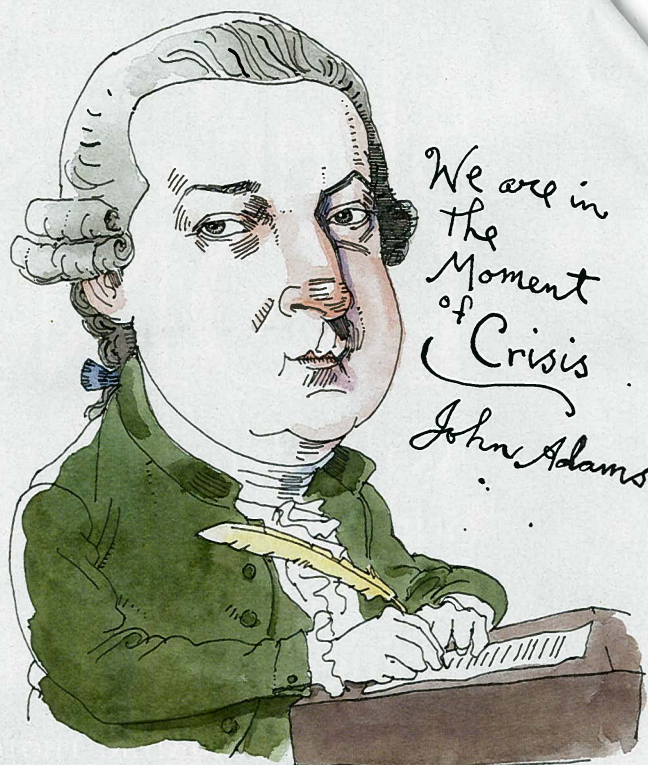
ONCE THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR WAS LOST, some in Britain argued that it had been unwinnable. For generals and admirals who were defending their reputations, and for patriots who found it painful to acknowledge defeat, the concept of foreordained failure was alluring. Nothing could have been done, or so the argument went, to have altered the outcome. Lord North was condemned, not for having lost the war, but for having led his country into a conflict in which victory was impossible.

In reality, Britain might well have won the war. The battle for New York in 1776 gave England an excellent opportunity for a decisive victory. France had not yet allied with the Americans. Washington and most of his lieutenants were rank amateurs. Continental Army soldiers could not have been more untried. On Long Island, in New York City and in upper Manhattan, on Harlem Heights, Gen. William Howe trapped much of the American Army and might have administered a fatal blow. Cornered in the hills of Harlem, even Washington admitted that if Howe attacked, the Continental Army would be "cut off" and faced with the choice of fighting its way out "under every disadvantage" or being starved into submission. But the excessively cautious Howe was slow to act, ultimately allowing Washington to slip away.

Britain still might have prevailed in 1777. London had formulated a sound strategy that called for Howe, with his large force, which included a naval arm, to advance up the Hudson River and rendezvous at Albany with General Burgoyne, who was to invade New York from Canada. Britain's objective was to cut New England off from the other nine states by taking the Hudson. When the rebels did engage—the thinking went—they would face a giant British pincer maneuver that would doom them to catastrophic losses. Though the operation offered the prospect of decisive victory, Howe scuttled it. Believing that Burgoyne needed no assistance and obsessed by a desire to capture Philadelphia—home of the Continental Congress—Howe opted to move against Pennsylvania instead. He took Philadelphia, but he accomplished little by his action. Meanwhile, Burgoyne suffered total defeat at Saratoga.

Most historians have maintained that Britain had no hope of victory after 1777, but that assumption constitutes another myth of this war. Twenty-four months into its Southern Strategy, Britain was close to reclaiming substantial territory within its once-vast American empire. Royal authority had been restored in Georgia, and much of South Carolina was occupied by the British.

As 1781 dawned, Washington warned that his army was "exhausted" and the citizenry "discontented." John Adams believed that France, faced with mounting debts and having failed



In 1781, John Adams feared that a demoralized France would abandon the battlefield. Without a decisive victory, America's fate might well have been determined by a peace conference.

to win a single victory in the American theater, would not remain in the war beyond 1781. "We are in the Moment of Crisis," he wrote. Rochambeau feared that 1781 would see the "last struggle of an expiring patriotism." Both Washington and Adams assumed that unless the United States and France scored a decisive victory in 1781, the outcome of the war would be determined at a conference of Europe's great powers.

Stalemated wars often conclude with belligerents retaining what they possessed at the moment an armistice is reached. Had the outcome been determined by a European peace conference, Britain would likely have retained Canada, the trans-Appalachian West, part of present-day Maine, New York City and Long Island, Georgia and much of South Carolina, Florida (acquired from Spain in a previous war) and several Caribbean islands. To keep this great empire, which would have encircled the tiny United States, Britain had only to avoid decisive losses in 1781. Yet Cornwallis' stunning defeat at Yorktown in October cost Britain everything but Canada.

The Treaty of Paris, signed on September 3, 1783, ratified the American victory and recognized the existence of the new United States. General Washington, addressing a gathering of soldiers at West Point, told the men that they had secured America's "independence and sovereignty." The new nation, he said, faced "enlarged prospects of happiness," adding that all free Americans could enjoy "personal independence." The passage of time would demonstrate that Washington, far from creating yet another myth surrounding the outcome of the war, had voiced the real promise of the new nation. ●